



Ombudsman helps fix account dispute

Imagine getting a bill for \$1,562 when you believed you were actually owed money. A woman said the Bureau of Collections mistakenly said she had been overpaid for child support. She gave them documentation in support of her claim, but the Bureau of Collections stood by its numbers.

So she contacted our office. We found that the dispute centered on how much child support had been paid on her account when the case was transferred from the clerk of court to the Bureau of Collections

about ten years ago.

The two agencies had differing figures for that amount — the Bureau of Collections' figure was significantly greater than the clerk of court's figure. But only the clerk of court still had documentation to support its figure, because the Bureau of Collections' records had been destroyed.

At our suggestion, the Bureau of Collections ultimately agreed to go by the clerk of court's figure and the account was corrected to reflect that the woman was still owed money.

Obligation clarification

A father believed his obligation to pay child support should be ending soon. His son was about to graduate from high school. The father said his son indicated no intention of going to college and had not taken the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

The man had previously called the child support office and was told there was no written verification indicating his son intended to go to college. Based on this, the father had anticipated his obligation would soon end, because his court order indicated the obligation would continue only if the child went to college.

But when he called the child support office again, he was told his obligation would continue based on a letter in the file. The father said he wanted a copy of the letter but was told it was confidential.

So he called our office. We called the child support office and asked about this case. They in turn called the child's mother, who had previously said her son was considering going to college. The child support worker told the mother there must be proof, such as a letter of acceptance from a college. If that was not received by the end of the month, the support obligation would end. If the information was received after billing ended, they would resume the support obligation.

We relayed this information to the father and he was very grateful. He said he spent thousands of dollars over the years on attorneys and court appearances. But this problem was resolved in just a couple of hours and at no charge.

Child support for inmates?

A man who was court-ordered to receive child support payments was arrested. The child who he had custody of moved in with their mother (who had been paying child support).

The man was later convicted and sentenced to 50 years in prison. And he's not eligible for parole until 2011.

The woman contacted the Child Support Recovery Unit (CSRU) to suspend the order. CSRU sent paperwork to the man in prison for him to indicate that he would agree to have the order suspended.

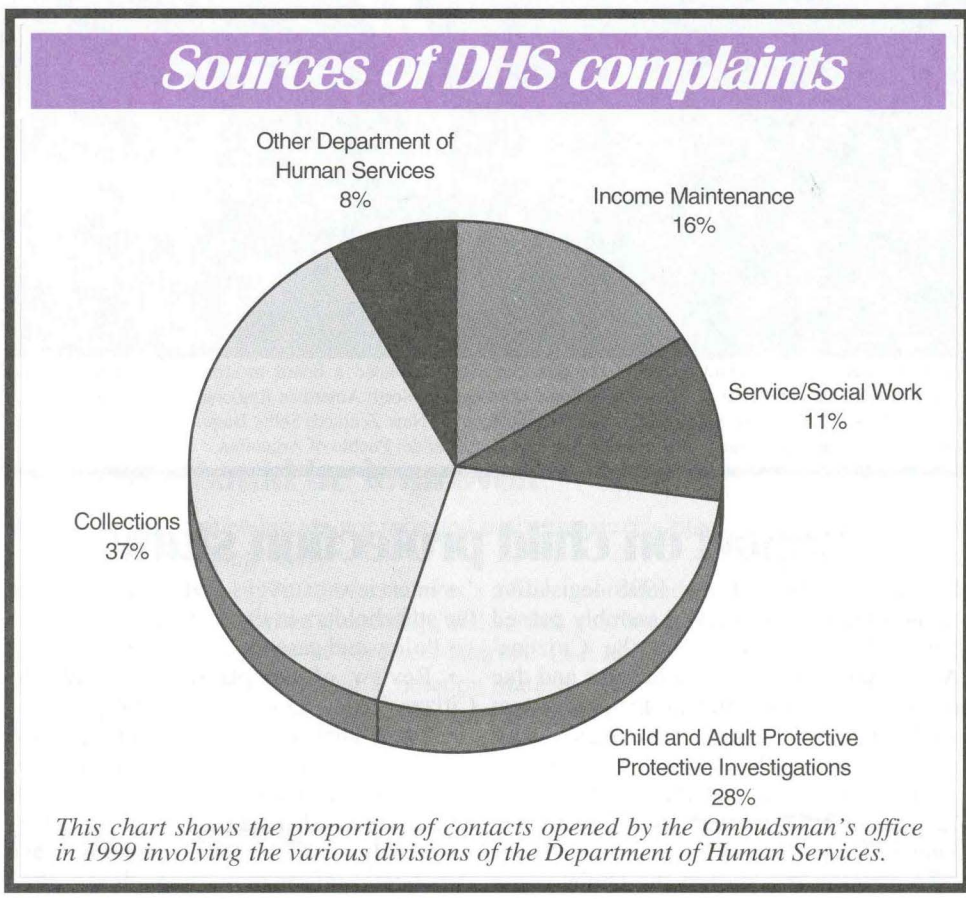
But the man did not send the paperwork back to CSRU. So CSRU told the woman that under Iowa law, the only other option would be for her to get a private attorney and go back to court to get the order suspended or terminated.

The woman called for an attorney and

found she couldn't afford his fees. She called our office and said her next step would be to quit her job and go on welfare. She said it was *absurd* that the state continued to garnish her wages and send those monies to a man who will be in prison for at least the next 12 years, especially since she was now caring for the child.

We immediately contacted CSRU. We questioned whether CSRU had discretion to suspend the order, considering the unique circumstances.

CSRU responded by sending the paperwork to the man a second time, along with a letter encouraging him to agree to have the order suspended. This time, it worked — he signed the papers and sent them back to CSRU. CSRU forwarded it on to the clerk of court and the order was suspended soon thereafter.



Phone access improved

A man got two letters from the Bureau of Collections. The first advised him of a change in the amount to be withheld from his paycheck for child support.

The letter included a toll-free phone number. He tried calling it but got a recording saying he had "dialed a number which can not be reached from your calling area." So he called our office.

We found the toll-free number was not accessible from the Des Moines calling area. But the Bureau of Collections said its software program could only accommodate one phone number on the form letter.

We suggested that if that was the case, the toll-free number needed to be accessible for all customers who got the letter, including those in the Des Moines calling area. After a lengthy review of all options, the Bureau of Collections lifted the block on the toll-free number for Des Moines area callers.

The second letter said the man was late in submitting the previous month's payment. He disputed this. But the letter didn't include a phone number to call. We relayed this to the Bureau of Collections and staff were directed to include the phone number for the customer service unit in the letter.

STUDY (Continued from page 1)

the Department of Human Services called for improvements in management oversight and coordination, policy development and consistency, service delivery, record keeping, training, communication, and staffing resources. Most significant among the recommendations requiring legislative

attention was the one calling for statutory authorization for departmental responses, notwithstanding confidentiality provisions, in cases where there has been publicity initiated by one of the parties and departmental response will not jeopardize child safety or privacy.

A written status report from the Department was received by the

Ombudsman in mid-February 2000 documenting progress toward implementation of many of these recommendations.

Copies of the Executive Summary of this report, as well as copies of the status report, can be obtained by contacting our office.

Child Support Advisory Committee



Deputy and Legal Counsel Ruth Cooperrider

Iowa law requires the Ombudsman's office to have a representative on the state's Child Support Advisory Committee. The committee gives input about the Department of Human Services' (DHS) child support policies and practices. I am the Ombudsman's representative on the committee and also am a member of its policy and legislation subcommittee. Two other subcommittees are operation review and public awareness.

The committee held six regular bi-monthly meetings and one special meeting in 1999.

Every four years the Iowa Supreme Court is responsible for reviewing the child support guidelines and criteria it established. One of the major tasks of the committee in 1999 was to identify issues and make recommendations to the Court. The committee sponsored seven forums around the state to get public input and held several discussion meetings, before coming up with five recommendations. They include: Raising the threshold of the base net monthly income range from \$501 to \$701 and changing the obligations within that range; reflecting more proportionately for both parents the actual costs of providing medical insurance and payments for unreimbursed medical expenses; and changing how support is calculated in joint physical care situations. A task force of the Court is currently working on determining appropriate changes to the guidelines.

The committee also assisted DHS in reviewing and making suggestions on several projects or studies. One project concerned proposed options on how to use federal grant money to promote parental access and visitation. A pilot project was established to provide mediation and neutral exchange sites with three agencies in Polk and Story counties. One study concerned a three-way affidavit process to establish paternity when the mother is married, but not to the biological father. DHS filed its report with recommendations to the Legislature in December. Another project, which is still ongoing,

The committee also assisted DHS in reviewing and making suggestions on several projects or studies.

is to put together a handbook about various topics and issues related to child support that would be available to any interested persons.

The committee also reviewed and commented on proposed rule changes or additions on several issues, including the date when an obligation is credited as having been paid, transfer of income withholding payments to the state disbursement unit (i.e., the Collections Services Center) and criteria for case closure.

The policy and legislation subcommittee is continuing to look at several other issues. These include: What to do when a juvenile court gives custody of a child to the person paying support for that child, but that court cannot change the support order; when in the month does DHS consider a person to be delinquent for enforcement purposes; whether payment of support should be required by law to be a condition of parole or probation; under what conditions DHS might satisfy or forgive a support debt owed only to the state.

OMBUDSMAN'S REPORT

1999

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This publication was released by the office of the Citizens' Aide/Ombudsman, which printed 6,500 copies at a cost of 23.3 cents per copy, to provide an annual report to the legislature, the governor and the public.

Toll-free numbers



Department of Human Services

STATE GOVERNMENT

Attorney General (Child Support Aware-	1-800-374-5437
Blind (Department for the)	1-800-362-2587
Child Abuse/Dependent Adult Hotline	1-800-362-2178
Child Support Recovery Unit	1-888-229-9223
Civil Rights Commission	1-800-457-4416
Citizens' Aide/Ombudsman	1-888-426-6283
Collections Service Center (child sup-	1-800-223-1302
Commission on the Status of Women	1-800-558-4427
Crime Victim Assistance Division	1-800-373-5044
Gambling Treatment Hotline	1-800-238-7633
Health Facilities Division (home health	1-800-383-4920
Human Services (Department of)	1-800-972-2017
Inspections and Appeals (Department	1-800-831-1394
Iowa Client Assistance Program	1-800-652-4298
(advocacy for clients of Vocational Re-	
Iowa COMPASS (information and refer-	1-800-779-2001
ral for Iowans with disabilities)	
Iowa Waste Reduction Center	1-800-422-3109
Long Term Care Residents Advocate	1-800-532-3213
Narcotics Division	1-800-532-0052
Prison Industries	1-800-332-7922
Radon Line	1-800-383-5992
Revenue and Finance (Department of)	1-800-367-3388
Senior Health Insurance Information	1-800-351-4664
Program (SHIIP)	
Small Business Development	1-800-532-1216
Small Business Liaison for Air Quality	1-800-351-4668
State Fair	1-800-545-3247
State Patrol Highway Emergency	1-800-525-5555
Helpline	
Tourism Information	1-800-345-4692
Transportation (Department of)	1-800-532-1121
Veterans Affairs Commission	1-800-838-4692
Utilities Board Consumer Services	1-877-565-4450
Vocational Rehabilitation Division	1-800-532-1486
Workforce Development Department	1-800-562-4692
	TTY: 1-800-831-1399

ISU EXTENSION HOTLINES

Iowa Concern (stress counseling, money	1-800-447-1985
problems, legal questions and other ar-	
Healthy Families (questions and referrals	1-800-369-2229
on maternity health services)	
Home Economics (questions about home	1-800-262-3804
and family issues)	
Teen Line (information and referrals for	1-800-443-8336
teens)	

MISCELLANEOUS

AIDS Hotline	1-800-445-2437
Better Business Bureau	1-800-222-1600
Domestic abuse hotline	1-800-942-0333
Federal information hotline	1-800-688-9889
Iowa Protection & Advocacy (for people	1-800-779-2502
Lawyer Referral Service (Iowa State Bar	1-800-532-1108
Legal Services Corporation of Iowa	1-800-532-1503
Legal Hotline for Older Iowans	1-800-992-8161
Youth Law Center	1-800-728-1172

Relationship improved

Over the last two years a woman and her income reinstated her son's coverage earlier that morning. We maintenance worker for the Department of Human Services relayed this information to the woman. She felt relieved, but (DHS) experienced ongoing problems. The lines of was still concerned about dealing with the worker in the communication between the two often crossed. Over time, future. The woman said she intended to request a new worker be assigned to her case. She also told us she intended to file a civil rights complaint against the worker.

The woman told us she believed our involvement helped the social worker change her attitude.

The woman became concerned when her pharmacist said her son's Medicaid coverage was cancelled. She believed the worker had made an error. Her son was out of his medication. Without Medicaid coverage, the worker change her attitude. She promptly returning her telephone calls and treating her with more respect. She feels that they are able to communicate better now and their relationship has greatly improved.

When we contacted the DHS, we learned the agency

Assistance needed in getting breathing apparatus

A man had an enlarged heart and sleep apnea that caused him to stop breathing when he slept. A doctor prescribed a machine that would help by providing a continuous flow of pressurized air and oxygen. was still pending, because the man had also applied for Social Security disability benefits, and that decision would impact DHS' decision. DHS said it just received information declaring the man disabled the day before we contacted them.

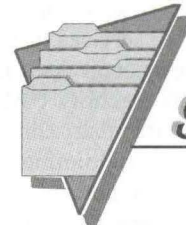
The man had no insurance and couldn't afford the machine. He went to the Department of Human Services (DHS) and applied for assistance through the Medicaid program. He also had applied for disability benefits through the federal Social Security Administration. DHS needed more information from the man in order to finish processing his application. DHS agreed to expedite his application upon receipt of that information.

Two months later, he had not received an answer. He get the machine more quickly if the provider would be willing to accept DHS' verbal confirmation of his eligibility. We called our office and we contacted DHS. His application

Ombudsman helps streamline certification process

New legislation requires non-registered day care providers be certified with the Department of Human Services (DHS) in order to receive block grant payments. We received a complaint alleging the certification process was taking over four months to complete. This was causing some providers to face significant delays between providing services and getting paid for those services. However, we questioned why the flow chart showed that requests for criminal-record checks would go from the regional office to the central office and then to the State Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI). DHS acknowledged that central office did nothing with that paperwork other than forward it to DCI.

We contacted DHS about its certification process. We reviewed a DHS flow-chart on the process and found the time allotted to complete each step was reasonable. With this brought to DHS's attention, the policy was changed and regional offices began sending the criminal check requests directly to DCI. This simple change saved an average of six to eight weeks in the certification process.



Schools

Free lunch for seniors

A school district had been offering an annual free-of-charge luncheon for community residents age 60 and older. A resident of the district questioned whether taxpayer dollars should be spent for such a purpose. funds should only be spent on programs that directly benefit the school lunch program. Because the luncheons are designed to benefit the entire district, not the lunch program specifically, DOE staff said nutrition funds should probably not be used, unless the monies came from outside organizations renting lunch program space or equipment.

High school students welcome the seniors with a short musical program in the auditorium, followed by lunch in the cafeteria. The lunch is prepared by school kitchen employees and served by students. But even if nutrition funds can't be used, general funds can. DOE staff said the requirement that general funds be spent for a public purpose is met by the luncheons, whose purpose is to improve students' overall education by strengthening relationships between students and seniors and encouraging greater senior volunteerism and participation in the schools.

We researched the matter and contacted several people, including the superintendent. He said the luncheon's purpose is to build greater community in the district. It provides a chance for school officials, high school students, and senior citizens to interact. It also serves to thank seniors for their volunteer efforts and to encourage more to participate in school activities. More than 200 seniors were expected to attend the next annual luncheon.

The district financed the luncheons, food and labor, with monies from the school nutrition fund. The Iowa Department of Education (DOE) told us that nutrition

We shared this information with the superintendent. He met with the district's attorney and local auditor and they arrived at the following solution: They would transfer monies from the general fund to the nutrition fund to cover the costs of the upcoming luncheon and, in future years, they will finance the luncheon totally from general funds.

High school agrees to pay for college course

A mother complained her son's high school was reneging on a promise to pay for a college course he took. We contacted the Iowa Department of Education (DOE), which designed the form in question. DOE staff said they believed if this form was signed by a school official, the school had agreed to pay for the post-secondary classes. DOE suggested the family appeal the decision to their school board. DOE also agreed the language on the form could be clearer. DOE changed the form to clarify that if a school official signs the form, they are approving payment for the classes listed on the form.

Iowa law allows high schools to pay for college courses for qualifying students, if the high school does not offer the course. The woman said her son took a college course because a high school counselor signed a form. When we called the mother to suggest she appeal, she said the school agreed to pay for the classes after we spoke with the superintendent.

We reviewed the form. It listed the courses that the student was asking the school to pay for. The high school counselor had signed the form.

We contacted the superintendent. He said the form only verified that the student was eligible to participate, and did not indicate the school agreed to pay. He also said the counselor did not have authority to sign the form.



Heat wave leads to early release

The Ombudsman's office doesn't suggest that a prison or jail should release a particular inmate, unless circumstances warrant the release.

For some unexplained reason, 1999 seemed to bring an unusually large number of complaints which led to inmates being *appropriately* released due to our office's involvement. Here are some of the more significant examples:

- A county jail inmate called during the "heat and humidity" wave of July 1999. The jail has no air conditioning or windows. Even with two fans, the inmate said conditions were bad. We called the jail administrator. He confirmed that conditions were nearly intolerable and said he sympathized with the inmates — all four of them — as well as the staff who worked in the jail. At our suggestion, the jail administrator agreed to look into options to address the problem. We also called the jail inspector for the state Department of Corrections, who in turn contacted the jail administrator.

A few hours later, we learned the county attorney's office had agreed to release three of the inmates on their own recognizance. And a deputy was driving the fourth inmate (the one who called our office) to a neighboring county jail which had air conditioning.

The jail administrator hoped the situation would help persuade county supervisors to

reconsider the sheriff's request for air conditioning at the jail.

- A prison inmate called and said he was supposed to be released from prison that day. He had tried to arrange a ride on his own but those plans fell through and he had not heard anything from prison officials. We immediately called the prison and they confirmed this inmate was supposed to be released that day. As a result of our call, the inmate was told to pack his belongings and was given a ride to his county of residence.

- The Parole Board approved a prison inmate for release to federal immigration officials. He was being deported back to his home country.

Two months later, the inmate called our office, wondering why he was still in prison. We contacted prison officials and learned the inmate's name was inadvertently not relayed to federal immigration officials for transfer. Arrangements were quickly made and the inmate was released to immigration officials four days later.

- An inmate told us he should have been released 11 days earlier, but wasn't because of a problem in getting credit for time he had served in a community residential facility. We contacted prison officials and the clerk of court office and the inmate was released from prison two days after calling us.

Message from the prison ombudsman

One in three. That's the number of prison-related contacts our office received in 1999, as compared with all contacts. (The actual figure was a little over 32 percent.)

That was a significant jump. Complaints from inmates or about prison issues have traditionally accounted for around 20 percent of our contacts.

The issue that leaped to the top of the complaint pile last year was time computation. New sentencing options, credit for time served in jails and residential facilities before prison commitment affect how much credit an inmate receives against their sentence. The most common complaint involved how long it takes counties to submit jail credits to the institutions.

Until streamlined by the legislature last year, jails had to certify jail credits to the clerk of district court, who in turn certified it to the Iowa Department of Corrections (DOC). Now, jails are required to certify that information directly to DOC. However, our review of these complaints indicated that word of this change in law may not have reached all the counties, as few are providing this information in this manner.

Also, with the many types of sentences and charges, institutional staff have little time for the intensive follow up these cases can require. We helped facilitate lawful releases in a few cases, but our office also lacks the resources to provide this assistance in all but a few cases.

The state's fiber optic network is being utilized extensively by the Iowa Board of Parole for its face-to-face interviews with inmates. This allows the Parole Board to travel less and use its time more efficiently. Interested parties may also attend these interviews in locations near their homes by making advance arrangements with the Parole Board.



Assistant for
Corrections
Judith
Milosevich

Many inmates use the fiber optics network to attend college classes. Each inmate pays their own tuition and then shares the "line fees" with other inmate students. I hope we continue to expand our use of the state's fiber optic network.

It seemed when DOC and the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics (UIHC) initiated telemedicine services in 1997, that it would save DOC a great deal of money in transportation and security costs. I was disappointed to learn that consultations and/or follow-up appointments still account for less than 10 percent of the total number of doctor-inmate consultations, about the same percentage as when the program started.

The director announced that DOC is making room in the prisons to hold 200 county jail inmates to make up for the portion of his budget the governor asked all departments to cut. The director said all of these inmates will receive some kind of health screening. I question how this will be accomplished and still provide health services to prison inmates.

Two hundred jail inmates may not sound like much when we consider our prison population averaged around 7,365 in 1999. However, jail populations turn over quickly.

Part of my concern arises from the fact that over 10 percent of the prison-related contacts we receive involve health services. Inmates get little more than emergency dental care. I am concerned about the drain on already scarce resources. We will watch this situation closely.

Complaints about waiting lists increased in 1999. Inmates complained about waiting to get into treatment programs, waiting to get into community based facilities, waiting for parole plan approval, waiting for transfers to supervision in other states. It is not uncommon for an inmate, once approved to participate, to wait months to get into some treatment programs, six months to get into some community based facilities, a month or more for parole plan approval, and several months for acceptance of supervision by another state.

Jail officials resolve foul odor

A former inmate of a county jail contacted us. He described the jail as crowded, filthy, and stinking of sewer gas. He also complained that there is little exercise and the food was cold.

We contacted the Department of Corrections' jail inspector. About the same time, we received similar complaints from another inmate about this jail.

Two of our investigators and the state jail inspector arranged for a meeting with the sheriff, the county attorney and a county supervisor. The sheriff explained the many steps he'd taken to address the problems. He agreed the jail had a foul smell and said employees in other courthouse offices also complained about the odor.

Just that morning, they discovered a "dry trap" in an unused shower area they'd used to store boxes. They removed the boxes and

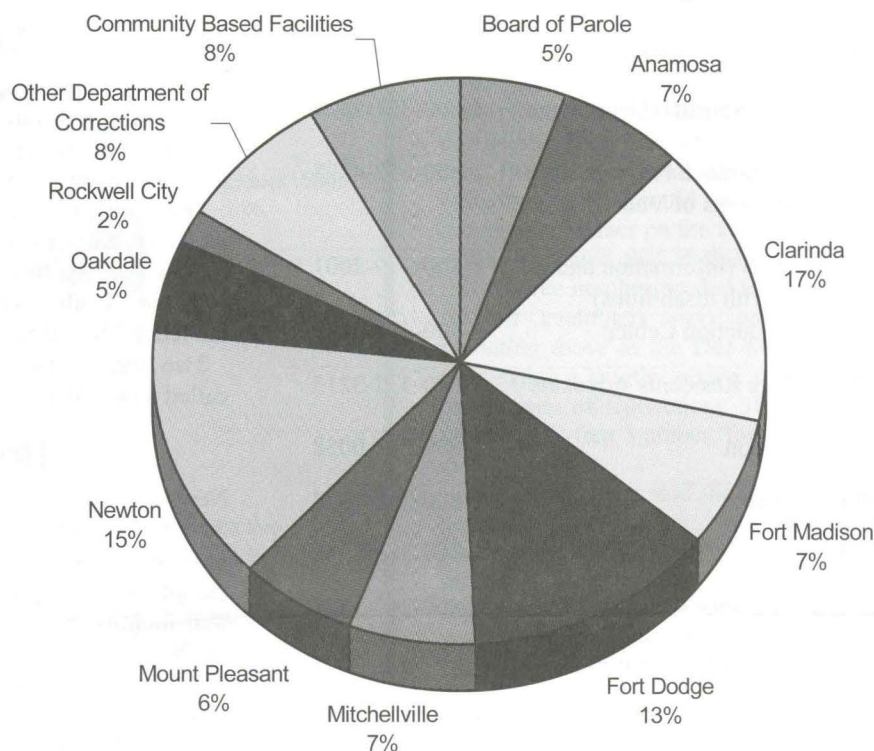
poured a bucket of water down the drain. That improved air quality instantaneously.

They had recently asked for bids to replace an air exchange unit. Because of the summer heat and lack of ventilation, they were not using the maximum security cells. The jail inspector reduced their capacity to 11 and gave them 45 days to replace the air exchange unit.

The sheriff and chief deputy were open to suggestions. We helped them get access to the standards of the American Corrections Association.

The sheriff contacted us several months later to advise they were contracting with another provider for their food. This occurred after the sheriff found hair in food meant for jail inmates. He also said the foul smell disappeared after filling the "dry trap."

Sources of Corrections complaints



This chart shows the proportion of contacts opened by the Ombudsman's office in 1999 involving the various institutions of the Department of Corrections.

Twin gets to visit brother in prison

A man with a severe heart problem visited our office one day. He was going to a hospital in two days for some tests that he might not survive.

Before the test, he was hoping to see his twin brother in prison. But the man was not eligible to visit because he was on parole himself. If he did not see his brother now, he was worried that he might never see him again.

We contacted the hospital, which verified the man's condition and the upcoming test. Staff confirmed there was some risk the man may not survive the tests.

We then contacted the prison where his brother was incarcerated. After explaining the situation and that his condition had been verified by the hospital, the warden agreed to grant the man a no-contact visit with his twin brother.

New technology not always what it's cut out to be

Ion scanners are the latest device in identifying certain chemical residue, specifically those associated with drug use. A special pad is used to wipe surfaces, such as hands and pockets. The cloth is then put through a machine which identifies any drug residue.

We learned about this technology after receiving numerous complaints from one prison. Inmates said prison staff were using the ion scanner results as the basis for disciplinary reports.

We began discussions with prison

officials about their testing procedures and the accuracy of the test results. After several weeks, we were informed that even correctional officers were questioning the results.

As a result of our inquiries and the institution's research, prison officials decided to release all affected inmates from disciplinary status and remove the incident from their records. The prison still uses the ion scanner, but it no longer writes disciplinary reports solely on those test results.

Consensus reached on six-percent surcharge

The Department of Corrections' (DOC) decision to assess a six percent surcharge on purchases made by inmates generated quite a few calls to our office. While DOC had the authority to institute the charge, there was inconsistency among the institutions regarding what purchases would be assessed the surcharge. In addition, we received complaints that inmates were not being refunded the surcharge on returned goods or on canteen items they had ordered but did not receive.

We met with the business managers from the institutions to help them come to a consensus on what items would be assessed the surcharge. It was also decided that as of July 1, 1999, surcharges would be credited back to inmate accounts on returned goods or orders not received. Based on information from that meeting, our office sent affected inmates a list of inmate charges and whether a surcharge would be added to those purchases.



Other state agencies

Social Security numbers and privacy

A citizen complained the state's income tax booklets were mailed with people's Social Security numbers on the outside label. He believed this was an unnecessary intrusion into people's privacy and a potential risk for identity fraud or theft.

We contacted the Department of Revenue and Finance (DORF). They initially said it would be too expensive to conceal Social Security numbers. We raised the privacy and identity theft issues to the department director. He agreed with our concerns and directed that Social Security numbers be concealed for future mailings.

We received two similar complaints in 1999. One involved turkey license application forms distributed by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

The concern was that a person following the instructions for mailing the form to DNR would fold it in a way that would display their Social Security number on the outside. The forms were designed this way to expedite processing at DNR.

We contacted DNR. It responded that Social Security numbers are not confidential by Iowa law. We agreed. But we raised the privacy and identity theft issues. DNR agreed to redesign the forms so that applicants could choose whether to have their Social Security numbers concealed when folded and mailed.

In the third case, a woman asked the Department of Human Services (DHS) to stop including her Social Security number in reports concerning her husband's daughter. DHS denied her request, so she called our office.

We could not find anything requiring DHS to include people's Social Security numbers in these reports, called case permanency plans. We eventually talked with the administrator of DHS' Children and Family Services Division. She agreed the time had come to change DHS policy.

The administrator said DHS is developing

a new statewide, casework computer system. She said the system would still include a line for Social Security numbers, but collecting that information would be optional. Further, she said, the division would advise all DHS workers not to print Social Security numbers without the person's permission. And the next statewide training for workers would include discussion of privacy issues, including the use of Social Security numbers.

Why appeal when agency admits mistake?

A woman was frustrated that Iowa Workforce Development (IWD) was making her "jump through hoops" to reinstate her unemployment benefits. She had been accepted into a supplemental program that allowed her to continue receiving benefits while working fewer hours, attending training, and taking college classes. But when she applied for reinstatement of unemployment benefits she was denied.

She called the local IWD office. They said she shouldn't have been denied and they set up an appeal hearing. But during the hearing, the administrative law judge could not hear the woman because of a poor cell phone connection. The hearing was rescheduled for two to four weeks later.

Though the local office admitted they should not have denied her benefits, she had to go additional weeks without the money.

She called us and we called the Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA), which was handling the appeal, to verify why the claim was denied and whether a mistake had been made. We were initially told that even if it was discovered that IWD erred in denying the claim, there was nothing they could do but present this information at the appeal hearing.

DIA later told us that the claim should not have been denied because of the special training program the woman was participating in. Although DIA could not overturn the decision directly, it could ask IWD staff whether they really intended to make the denial decision.

The benefits were restored that same day. The appeal hearing went forward, but only as a formality to inform the hearing officer of the agency's new decision.



EXTRA MILERS

Public employees we recognize as special because they deliver top quality service

Jerry Burt, Deputy Warden, Fort Dodge Correctional Facility — for being a fair, responsible and responsive prison administrator.

Ben McDaniels, Office of Field Support, Department of Human Services — for making personable and timely responses to our inquiries concerning a wide variety of DHS issues.

Lori Myers, Parole Board — for providing prompt and thorough responses to our inquiries, and for her patience in answering our questions.

Lou Pluckhahn, West Liberty City Manager — for his sincere efforts in finding a mutually acceptable resolution to a difficult problem.

Ralph Schaeffer, Anamosa State Penitentiary — for his quality responses to our inquiries and for maintaining and sharing his sense of humor.

Dick Schrade, Iowa Veterans Home — for being a great listener and problem-solver.

Dave Titcomb, Department of Transportation — for taking the initiative to look further than we may ask in order to answer his questions along with ours.

Marvin Van Haaften, Marion County Sheriff — for treating all complaints seriously and making a concerted effort to resolve them.

Report critiques Insurance Division's oversight of Clinton funeral home

The State Insurance Division was unreasonably lax in overseeing a Clinton funeral home's efforts to correct problems involving about 1,500 customers, according to a report released by the Citizens' Aide/Ombudsman.

Those customers stood to lose about \$3.5 million when Clinton Memorial Park Cemetery & Funeral Home, Inc., went out of business in 1994, three years after the Insurance Division initially found the business had violated state laws concerning pre-need funeral and cemetery arrangements.

The Insurance Division acted to reduce those losses — primarily through a court-ordered receivership which recovered \$1.6 million for consumers, and also helped to arrange for credits offered by the new owner. But not all customers were eligible for the credits, and most who were had to make additional payments to get what they had previously purchased. The 38-page report said it's uncertain how much the losses were reduced through the credit offers and insurance claims.

Considering the financial and emotional toll on customers, the Ombudsman wrote that his review "indicates that for at least some of those customers, these adverse affects may have been avoidable and unnecessary."

The Insurance Division first became involved in 1990, when it learned about possible problems with Clinton Memorial's accounts involving pre-need customers — people who had purchased, or were in the process of purchasing, products and services before the time of need.

After a year-long investigation, the Insurance Division in 1991 found several violations of state law. The violations primarily involved shortages in the amount of payments in trust and the number of products that were warehoused. The violations didn't appear to be intentional, and while the Insurance Division could have taken severe enforcement action, such actions in other cases tended to harm the business, and ultimately harmed consumers.

As a result, the Insurance Division tried a new approach, referred to as a "work out." The idea was to keep the business open with the expectation that it could make up the shortages through continued operations, with the Insurance Division setting goals to be met by specified deadlines. "Under the circumstances, the Ombudsman admires the

Unit's decision to try this new approach, with the ultimate goal of helping Clinton Memorial's customers," the report said.

"The Unit's follow-through, however, was inadequate," the Ombudsman added. "After finding statutory violations had already occurred, the complex and abstract nature of the pre-need funeral industry obligated the Unit to proactively look for any further signs of trouble. But the Unit either wasn't looking for them or failed to appreciate their significance."

For example, while Clinton Memorial was specifically ordered not to make any new pre-need sales from July 1991 to May 1992, it made nine new sales in that time. While three of the sales were contained in a report received by the Insurance Division in April 1992, there is no indication the Insurance Division was aware of that fact a month later when it partly reinstated Clinton Memorial's license to make new sales.

In January 1993, the Insurance Division fully reinstated Clinton Memorial's license to make new sales, even though regulators initially objected to the idea. In addition, the Ombudsman's investigation found that Clinton Memorial had made relatively little progress towards its goals at that time. Under the circumstances, "the decision to fully reinstate Clinton Memorial's establishment permit was unsupportable and unreasonable," the report said. "Twenty six new customers ultimately lost a total of \$49,850 as a result of this decision."

In March 1993, the Insurance Division received a report showing Clinton Memorial in 1992 received about \$177,000 for pre-need contracts sold in previous years, but put none of those monies into trust. Though the Insurance Division said that report triggered an audit which found extensive problems, it did not act on that report for eight months, for reasons that are unclear. "Whatever the reasons, the Unit's failure to respond gave Clinton Memorial another eight months to misappropriate pre-need income and merchandise," the Ombudsman wrote.

In the end, the report said it's unclear whether Clinton Memorial's "trusting deficit" for pre-need accounts was reduced as a result of the "work out." It adds that of the 303

pre-need customers who made payments after the "work out" began, most (278) lost money — a net loss of more than \$200,000.

The report acknowledged that regulating the pre-need funeral and cemetery industries can be complicated and time-consuming, and that the Insurance Division does not have unlimited staff and resources. "However, if there is a lesson to be learned from the Clinton Memorial experience, it is that the Unit should not undertake any similar 'work out' efforts unless it can proactively look for warning signs," the Ombudsman wrote. "As this experience showed, a 'work out' carries the risk that aggregate consumer losses can actually grow. Unless the Unit can ensure that won't happen, it is not a risk worth taking."

AGENCY'S REPLY

In his response to the report, Craig Goettsch, Superintendent of Securities for the Insurance Division, defended the agency's performance and disputes a number of the Ombudsman's findings and conclusions. "There is no question that our work on the Clinton case was hurt by the lack of staff," he wrote. "Given the limited staff and resources, we were able to accomplish a great deal in this case."

"Frankly, the message we receive from the report is that the safe course for the office is to take immediate licensing action against violators of statutes," Goettsch added. "The message becomes 'don't exercise discretion and don't act in the public interest as a whole.'"

Dennis Britson, director of the Insurance Division's Regulated Industries Unit, wrote, "Sometimes, no matter what you try, or how hard you try, things still don't come out well. This aptly describes the Clinton Memorial case. It was not one of the Bureau's success stories. We truly regret the financial losses and emotional distress of Clinton Memorial's customers. We will proceed differently should we ever have a similar case in the future."

"However, that differs from a belief that our decisions were 'unreasonable' or an 'abuse of discretion' at the time they were made," Britson added. A copy of the Insurance Division's unedited reply is appended to the report, copies of which can be obtained from the Ombudsman's office.

What to do before calling the Ombudsman

A difference of opinion or misunderstanding is often resolved by simply taking the time to talk and listen.

So, if you have a problem with a state or local government agency, first take the matter up with the agency involved before calling our office. Many times an agency official will be eager to explain a specific policy or will correct the problem to your satisfaction. If they don't, give us a call.

Here are some good common sense steps to take when trying to resolve any "consumer" problem, whether it be with a government agency or a company in the private sector:

Be prepared. Know what questions you are going to ask (it helps to write them down.) Be sure to have any relevant information you need available before you contact the agency.

Be pleasant. Treat public employees as you like to be treated. Getting angry or rude will not resolve your problem and may only confuse the real issues.

Keep records. Take notes, ask for the names and titles of employees you speak with, and save all of your correspondence.

Ask questions. Ask why the agency acted as it did. Ask employees to identify the rules, policies or laws that governed their actions. Ask for copies.

Talk to the right people. Don't get angry with the first employee you meet; usually, he or she cannot make or change policy. If you cannot resolve the matter, ask to talk with a supervisor. Keep asking questions until you understand what happened and why.

Read what is sent to you (including the fine print!) Carefully read all information sent to you. Many agency decisions may be appealed, but there are deadlines. Be sure to follow appeal rules and deadlines. It's a good idea to mail your appeal certified, return receipt.

If you follow these suggestions and still cannot resolve the problem, then give us a call toll-free at 1-888-IA-OMBUD (426-6283) or in the Des Moines area at 281-3592. Maybe we can help.

ANGRICK (Continued from page 1)

Ombudsman as a place to air their dissatisfactions, or, perhaps, a combination of these factors. Additionally the number of Iowans receiving economic assistance is low and this also may be a factor in the overall reduction of DHS complaints and information requests. It is noteworthy that the number and proportion of complaints and inquiries my office receives about child support issues remains strong.

Corrections complaints are a different matter. Iowa's prison and community-based corrections populations have dramatically increased in the 30 years the Ombudsman has existed. It is well known within corrections that the Ombudsman investigates complaints. There has been a direct correlation between the number of complaints brought to the Ombudsman and the increases in the population in Iowa's corrections system and the length of stay in the system.

Contacts about county government last year came in the following categories:

- County jails: 271 contacts (44 percent of county government contacts)
- County attorneys: 110 (18 percent)
- Sheriff departments: 101 (16 percent)
- County supervisors: 31 (5 percent)

At the municipal level of Iowa government 269 contacts, or 48 percent, were about city police; 116 dealt with city councils; and 31 were about mayors.

Iowa has many metropolitan and regional governmental entities. This somewhat invisible and unrecognized layer of local government administers significant public services. The various autonomous multi-county community-based corrections boards, programs and facilities accounted for 146 (or 92 percent) of the 159 contacts in this general category. Other agencies in this category of local government include Community Action Agencies, Area Education Agencies, Regional Library boards, Rural Electric Cooperatives, 28E Intergovernmental Agencies, Community Colleges and Area Agencies on Aging.

School districts didn't account for many complaints and requests to the Ombudsman during 1999. This has been a perennial occurrence.

Complaints and information requests about state government agencies, other than Corrections and Human Services, patterned themselves typically as they have for the past decade.

The 1990s were generally good times for most Iowans. Our economy improved, the number of individuals claiming unemployment compensation reached an all-time low, state government sought to be more responsive to public concerns. The criticisms the Ombudsman directed toward the Department of Inspections and Appeals about inconsistent and lax regulation of nursing homes are being addressed. The increased presence of the Department of Natural Resources in air pollution compliance appeared to overcome initial anxieties in the regulated community, and the Ombudsman's critique of localized inconsistent DNR monitoring and regulation of water quality was echoed by

1999 Complaints Opened by Agency

State Government Department or Agency	Jurisdictional complaints	Non-jurisdictional complaints	Information requests	Pending	Total	Percent of total
Agriculture & Land Stewardship	3	0	1	2	6	0.1%
Attorney General/Department of Justice	8	0	35	1	44	1.0%
Auditor	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Blind	2	0	1	0	3	0.0%
Citizen's Aide/Ombudsman	1	0	42	4	47	1.0%
Civil Rights Commission	7	0	2	2	11	0.2%
College Aid Commission	5	0	0	0	5	0.1%
Commerce	12	0	23	3	38	0.7%
Corrections	1149	0	107	302	1558	30.7%
Cultural Affairs	0	0	1	1	2	0.0%
Economic Development	3	0	6	0	9	0.2%
Education	6	0	3	4	13	0.3%
Educational Examiners Board	1	0	0	0	1	0.0%
Elder Affairs	1	0	14	0	15	0.3%
Ethics and Campaign Disclosure Board	1	0	2	1	4	0.1%
Executive Council	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
General Services	2	0	0	0	2	0.0%
Human Rights	0	0	5	2	7	0.1%
Human Services	360	0	51	140	551	10.9%
Independent Professional Licensure	3	0	5	1	9	0.2%
Information & Technology Services	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Inspections & Appeals	19	0	7	4	30	0.6%
Iowa Communication Network	1	0	0	0	1	0.0%
Iowa Finance Authority	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Iowa Public Television	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Law Enforcement Academy	1	0	0	0	1	0.0%
Lottery	0	0	1	0	1	0.0%
Management	1	0	3	0	4	0.1%
Natural Resources	18	0	6	6	30	0.6%
Parole Board	57	0	27	15	99	2.0%
Personnel	4	0	4	2	10	0.2%
Professional Teachers Practice Commission	0	0	0	1	1	0.0%
Public Defense	2	0	1	1	4	0.1%
Public Employees Relations Board	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Public Health	8	0	12	0	20	0.4%
Public Safety	20	0	5	7	32	0.6%
Regents	16	0	1	4	21	0.4%
Revenue & Finance	30	0	16	11	57	1.1%
Secretary of State	0	0	3	0	3	0.0%
State Fair Authority	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
State Government (General)	15	0	120	7	142	2.8%
Transportation	55	0	18	24	97	1.9%
Treasurer	1	0	1	0	2	0.0%
Veterans Affairs Commission	2	0	2	5	9	0.2%
Workforce Development	28	0	10	10	48	0.9%
State government - non-jurisdictional						
Governor	0	7	4	1	12	0.2%
Judiciary	0	122	18	6	146	2.9%
Legislature and Legislative Agencies	0	2	7	2	11	0.2%
Governmental Employee-Employer	0	15	0	0	15	0.3%
Local government						
City Government	383	0	58	123	564	11.1%
County Government	403	0	40	176	619	12.2%
Metropolitan/Regional Government	9	0	2	2	13	0.2%
Community Based Correctional Programs	110	0	21	15	146	2.9%
Schools & School Districts	30	0	1	6	37	0.7%
Non-Jurisdictional						
Non-Iowa Government	0	85	31	3	119	2.3%
Private	0	331	114	12	457	9.0%
Totals	2777	562	831	906	5076	100.0%

private and federal voices. Addressing Iowa's water quality is now a primary agency and legislative interest.

In 1999 the Ombudsman issued a report critical of the Insurance Division's oversight of a pre-need funeral business and which hopefully will prevent a reoccurrence of the situation experienced elsewhere in the state.

Since 1970, the Ombudsman has amassed a large volume of records relating to the work of the office. Well over 100,000 complaints and inquiries have been made to the office, many of these ending up as paper files. That volume is now becoming a managerial problem. In late 1999, I decided to review our records retention policy to reduce the demands they create. In 2000, the Ombudsman will begin a policy of only keeping complaint and information request records for five years. Records older than five years will be destroyed, unless the file relates to an Ombudsman published report, an administrative or legislative recommendation, or has other historical value to the office or the State.

Informing Iowans about the Ombudsman's services is an important activity of the office. We accomplish this through a variety of outreach efforts, including operation of a booth at the Iowa State Fair, speaking engagements across the state, publishing and distributing this annual report and related descriptive brochures. New this past year was the launching of an Ombudsman Web Site (at <http://staffweb.legis.state.ia.us/cao/>). Increasing our presence on the information highway will provide another way for people to learn about the office. It will also allow individuals to

contact us directly - and quickly - via email.

During 1999, the Iowa Ombudsman office continued to play leading roles in Ombudsmanship nationally and internationally. My staff and I are often contacted as other states and jurisdictions consider creating an Ombudsman. My Deputy, Ruth Cooperider, participated on the American Bar Association's Ombudsman Definition and Standards Committee as the United States Ombudsman Association's designee. I participated in an at-large capacity. I was also elected to the Board of Directors of the International Ombudsman Institute and subsequently by my colleagues and peers in the United States and Canada as a Regional Vice President from North America on the Board.

The Ombudsman or staff continued to serve on the Child Support Advisory Committee (see article on page 2). I participated on a committee formed by the Iowa Foster Care Parents' Association to develop an informational booklet for foster care parents who become subject to a child protection assessment. This committee was a direct result of the Child Protection System study my office was asked to do by the General Assembly in 1998 (see article on page 1). Assistant Ombudsman Kristie Hirschman served on the Governor's Advisory Task Force on Regulatory Process, Rule Making and Rules Review.



Department of Transportation

DOT improves accessibility

A woman with a physical disability had difficulty getting to a driver's license station operated by the Department of Transportation (DOT).

The DOT station is located in a private shopping mall. The woman walks with a cane and hoped to park her car near the entrance closest to the DOT station. But she had to park several rows away because none of the spaces in the two closest aisles were designated for people with disabilities.

And when she got to the entrance, she had great trouble opening and getting through the double-set of doors.

She called our office. We contacted DOT's Facilities Manager and a consultant with the State Division on the Status of Persons with Disabilities who is regarded as an expert on accessibility issues.

The consultant said Iowa law requires parking spaces for people with disabilities to be located on the shortest accessible route to the nearest accessible entrance. He visited the site and recommended DOT move some of its designated spaces to the two center rows of parking immediately in front of the entrance doors.

At our request, DOT's Facilities Manager agreed to discuss the issue with the consultant. DOT (and the building owner) later agreed to move four designated spaces to the front of the two rows of parking closest to the main entrance.

Regarding the other issue, the consultant found the entrance doors were in compliance with state and federal law. However, DOT and the building owner agreed to install an automatic door there.

Sergeant needs a new license

A sergeant in the U.S. Air Force was home on leave. He wanted to renew his driver's license but the Department of Transportation (DOT) told him he didn't have enough documentation.

He contacted a U.S. Congressman's office, which referred him to us. The sergeant told us that he wanted to get a new license as his current one showed an expired date. He had a military extension form indicating his current license was still valid, but said this can cause some confusion when stationed in other countries.

He had provided the local DOT office his driver's license and current military identification, which included the extension authorized by the military. But staff told him that was not adequate and needed

documentation verifying the date he entered the military.

We contacted DOT staff in Des Moines. Their files confirmed the man had been granted an indefinite military extension in 1991. They weren't sure why the local DOT didn't issue him a new license, if he had his current license with him.

We contacted the local DOT supervisor. She also was unable to determine why he hadn't been issued a license, but asked us to tell him to come in at his earliest convenience. She suggested that he ask for her and she would ensure the situation was resolved.

We relayed this information to the man. He went in the next day and got his license renewed with no further problems.

DOT mows traffic hazard

A man reported a traffic hazard in his neighborhood. Tall grass in a vacant lot was obstructing motorists' view of oncoming traffic. He believed the Department of Transportation (DOT) owned the land. But he wasn't sure whether the DOT or the city was responsible for maintaining the property.

We contacted DOT. We learned there was some confusion as to which division within the agency was actually responsible for this property. This was the first time in five years that anyone asked the DOT to mow the lot. Once we notified the appropriate office, they assured us they would mow the grass within a few days. Because the agency was now aware of the issue, they agreed to mow the lot on a regular basis.

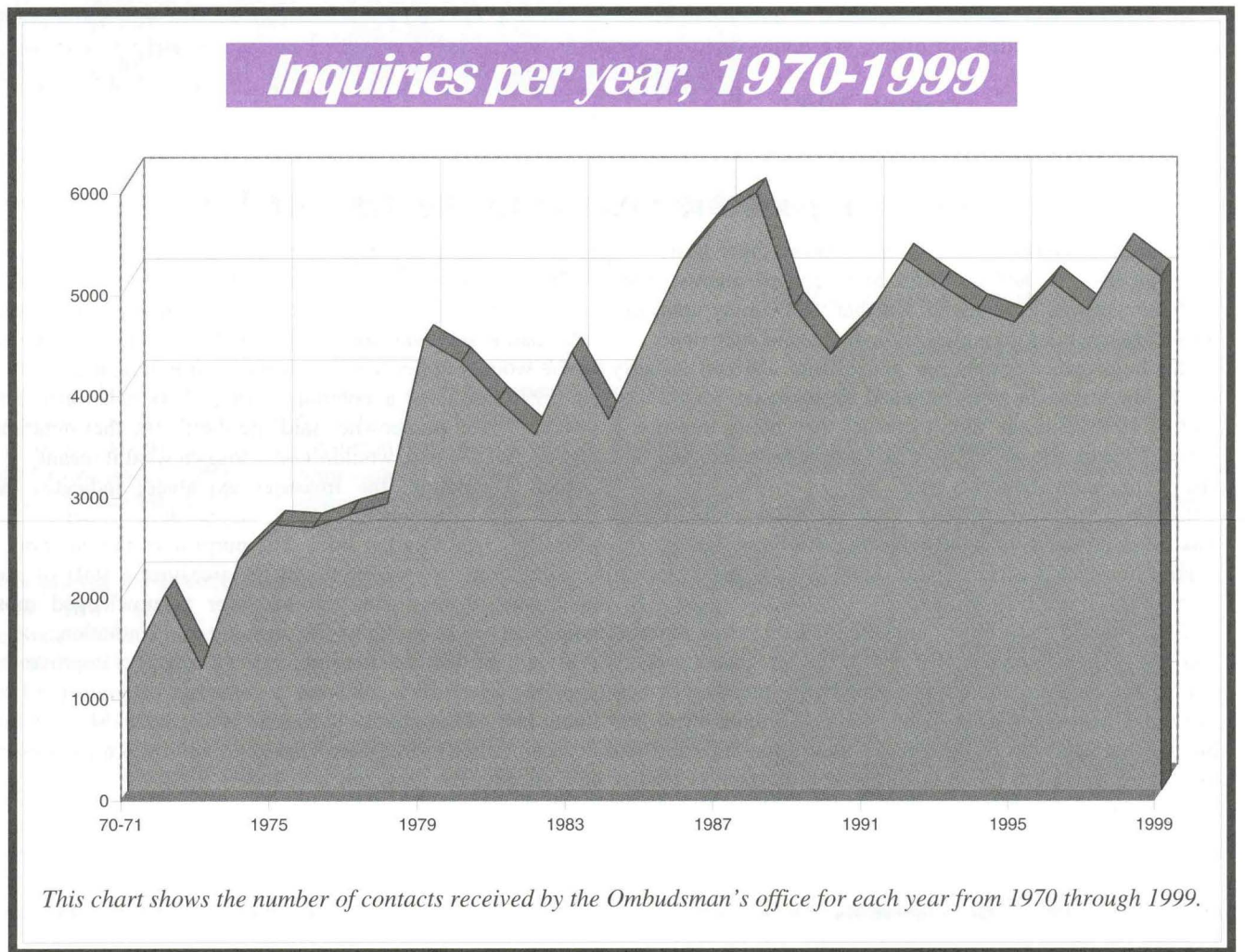
We later confirmed with the man that the DOT continued to properly maintain the property.

Ombudsman helps clarify notice

A woman was involved in a motor vehicle accident. The Department of Transportation (DOT) suspended her license. She filed an appeal. DOT sent her a notice delaying the suspension pending an appeal hearing.

The notice stated in part, "[T]his notice is your permit to drive pending the results of a hearing." The woman's driver's license was going to expire before the hearing. But she mistakenly interpreted the notice to mean that she didn't need to renew her license until after the hearing. (When she went to renew her license several months later, she was told it expired and she would have to take the written test.)

We contacted DOT and learned this was a common misunderstanding. DOT agreed to waive the written test for the woman. In response to our inquiry, DOT added a line to the notice specifying that the notice does not exempt drivers from renewing their license in a timely manner.



Small businesses

OK, we'll give you a hearing

A salesman said he stood to lose a sizable sales commission because of a decision by the Iowa Communications Network/Iowa Telecommunications & Technology Commission (ICN).

His client was a long-distance telephone company. An area education agency wanted to enter into a contract with the long-distance carrier because it would save almost \$22,000 annually compared to ICN's charges. (Iowa law requires area education agencies to buy long-distance service from ICN, unless ICN grants a waiver.)

The private carrier was able to beat ICN's price because it qualifies for a federal reimbursement program. Whether ICN qualifies under the program is an issue currently in litigation.

After negotiating the contract, the area education agency requested a waiver. ICN deferred acting on the request for two reasons:

- A court case was pending which could affect the price of ICN's service; and
- ICN was looking at a new rate plan for phone services.

In deferring action, ICN reasoned these issues may "significantly alter the circumstances surrounding the request." However, ICN made that decision without granting the area education agency a hearing — something required under ICN's own rules.

When we questioned this, ICN acknowledged that a mistake had been made and said hearings would be held for this area education agency and another one that had made a similar waiver request. Following the hearings, ICN granted one-year waivers to both agencies. This allowed the agencies to save money immediately and also allowed more time for ICN to resolve the court case and develop a new rate plan.

Rules improved for unemployment rate cases

An employer got a notice from the Iowa Workforce Development (IWD). It informed him of a significant increase in his unemployment insurance rate, because his business was re-categorized from construction to service.

Although the instructions were confusing, it appeared the employer had to choose one of the following three options:

- Pay the disputed amount in full. If he did this, it meant he agreed he owed the higher amount and he lost his appeal rights.
- File his payroll report with no payment. But if he lost his appeal, he would owe the higher amount, plus interest and penalties.
- File his payroll report with the amount he

believed he owed. Again, if he lost his appeal, he would have to pay interest and penalties on the balance not submitted.

We checked and found a fourth option in the IWD's administrative rules: It has the authority to allow the employer to pay the disputed amount in full and yet retain his appeal rights.

We suggested IWD change its administrative rules to make this option more prominent. We also suggested it change instructions in the notice to simplify, clarify, and expand on the employer's options. IWD revised the administrative rules and the instructions accordingly. (In this case, the employer's appeal was not successful.)

We suggested the agency change its administrative rules to make this option more prominent.

Catching up the backlog

An insurance agent was having trouble getting a final autopsy report from the State Medical Examiner's office, under the Department of Public Safety (DPS). The agent wanted to help get the report to the insurance investigator so the surviving family could receive the life insurance payment.

We were aware that the newly appointed

DPS director was addressing a backlog of uncompleted paperwork in the Medical Examiner's office. We relayed this issue to her.

The final autopsy report was issued to the insurance investigator within a week. The DPS director assured us that she would closely monitor efforts to address the backlog.



Local government

Retiree gets ticket cleared with call to Ombudsman

Imagine this surprise: You've never been to a particular town in your entire life, but you get a "reminder" notice about an unpaid parking ticket there.

This happened to a 70-year-old retiree last year. Living on a small fixed income, the \$5 fine was more than he could afford. The notice gave a phone number to call, but he did-

n't have long-distance service.

So he called our toll-free number. We took down his license number and vehicle description. Then we called the city clerk's office. They looked up the ticket and said it was issued to a passenger vehicle — but the retiree only owned an old truck. They agreed to rescind the ticket.

Water ordinance changed in accordance with state law

A landlord got a letter from the municipal water utility stating the previous month's bill for one of his properties had not been paid. The letter said the landlord had eight days to pay the bill or the city would attach a lien to the property.

The landlord paid the bill but objected to only being given eight days. So he called our office. We reviewed Iowa law

and found a section that requires such notices be sent "not less than 10 days prior to certification of the lien to the county treasurer."

We contacted city officials about this. Ultimately, they persuaded the city council to revise the ordinance to establish a 15-day period between when a bill is due and when the city will certify the lien to the county treasurer.

Notice of past-due taxes could be improved

Homeowners who pay their property taxes three years late are typically assessed penalties and accrued interest. One such homeowner questioned whether the county treasurer should do a better job issuing reminders about such debts.

This homeowner bought her house from a friend in early 1997. She knew she was obligated to pay taxes for the last half of 1996. But she didn't contact the county treasurer's office. Instead, she waited for a bill that never came, and said she did not learn about this until 1999.

She paid the taxes, along with penalties and accrued interest. But she contacted our office because she felt the county treasurer's office should have done a better job of alerting her to this debt sooner.

We contacted the county treasurer. Her records showed that the required notices for the taxes in question were mailed to a business address provided by the previous owner. Why the previous owner, who remains friends with the homeowner and who resided in the area, apparently did not give those notices to the homeowner is a mystery. (Changes

in ownership are not reflected in the treasurer's files until the following year.)

By 1997, the treasurer's files contained the new information on ownership, and so that year's notice was sent to the woman at her home address. That notice, and the one for 1998, included a notation stating, "Tax sale certificate 98-212." The homeowner said she didn't see that notation; and even if she had, wouldn't have known what it meant.

Such a notation, the treasurer explained, indicates the parcel has delinquent taxes; such delinquencies can ultimately lead to a tax sale. The purpose of the notation is to alert both the taxpayer and the treasurer's staff of any delinquent taxes. But the treasurer acknowledged most taxpayers would not know the meaning of the notation.

In light of this, the treasurer offered to try to improve the situation. Her office relies on a computer program used by about half of the county treasurers in the state. She belongs to a committee of treasurers that gives advice to the company that operates the program.



Informing Iowans about the Ombudsman's services is an important activity of the office. For the past several years, the office has operated an informational booth in the Varied Industries Building of the Iowa State Fair. Here, Citizens' Aide/Ombudsman Bill Angrick and Temporary Secretary Laura Heemstra are shown in the booth we operated during the 1999 Fair.

In response to our inquiry, the treasurer agreed to propose two changes:

- Add a prominent message on notices to any parcel with past-due taxes or that is subject to tax sale. The message could say something like, "Delinquent Taxes" and the year involved.

- Add a "pop-up" message that would appear on the computer screen whenever treasurer staff open a file to enter tax payment receipt information. The message could say something like, "This parcel has delinquent taxes."

The treasurer said she was confident the group would agree to these changes.

We told the homeowner that the treasurer agreed to work towards improving their computer and tax statement system to prevent similar problems in the future. We also referred the homeowner to an attorney to explore the possibility of a tort claim against the county and possible legal action against the previous owner.

Can we meet...

with your organization or group? Staff from the Ombudsman's office are available to give presentations about our services. A video about the office is also available. Brochures and newsletters are available in quantity.

Citizens' Aide/Ombudsman
Capitol Complex
215 East Seventh Street
Des Moines, Iowa 50319-0231

Phone: 1-888-426-6283 or (515) 281-3592
E-mail: Ombud@legis.state.ia.us
Internet: <http://staffweb.legis.state.ia.us/cao/>
TTY: (515) 242-5065
Fax: (515) 242-6007



University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics

Hospital agrees to write off balance

In small town Iowa, it seems everyone knows everyone else's business. In this case, it paid off. A dentist's office called our office about a man who was mentally challenged and who they "watched out for."

The man had been sent to the University of Iowa Hospital and Clinics (UIHC) for oral surgery some time before. The dentist's office discovered UIHC was sending the man's

account to a collection agency because he had failed to sign a Medicare release form.

They called to ask if we might be able to help. We promptly called UIHC and explained the situation. After a quick inquiry, UIHC called back and said it would pull the account from the collection agency and write off the balance — over \$1,300.

Billing problem resolved

A woman who frequented the University of Iowa Hospital and Clinics (UIHC) wrote to ask for help with an ongoing billing problem. It seemed that every time her insurance company settled with UIHC, the hospital tried to bill her for the provider discount (a discount offered to patients who are insured by a particular company).

We called UIHC. They checked and responded that the woman was correct, she should not be charged for the

provider discount. However, this information was not reaching the billing department before her bill went out.

UIHC said it would try to find a permanent solution to this problem. More immediately, UIHC added a note to the woman's computer file indicating she should not be charged for the provider discount. We were also able to provide her with a direct number and contact person to correct any future errors.

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**Annual Report: Iowa
Citizens' Aide/Ombudsman**

